The Never-Ending Story: Discursive Legitimation in Social Media Dialogue

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Abstract

This paper explores the dialogical dimensions of discursive legitimation in social media sites to understand how organisations produce knowledge of legitimacy in concert with their stakeholders. Drawing on the dialogical theories of Bakhtin and Nikulin, we consider the potential for conceptualising discursive legitimation as a product of dissent: an on-going 'allosensual' dialogue comprised of different voices and competing knowledge claims. We explore this through a micro-level analysis of organisation-led social media sites, wherein organisational practices are increasingly subjected to public scrutiny and where knowledge of legitimacy can be significantly shaped. Our dialogical lens highlights three inter-related functions of discursive legitimation. *Discursive authorisation* represents attempts to assume a credible 'voice' in-relation-to-'other' voices, within the dialogue. *Discursive validation* represents attempts to subject truth claims about legitimacy to rational, normative and moral verification. Finally, *discursive finalisation* represents attempts to harmonise dissent, either by co-opting or antagonising stakeholders towards consensus. Primarily, this paper unpacks the role of social media in legitimation processes, whilst also elaborating on organisational attempts to control stakeholder dialogue in online contexts.

Key Words: Allosensus, dialogue, legitimacy, communication, social media.

Introduction

Do social media provide new communicational spaces in which the legitimacy of organisations can be shaped and contested? There is growing evidence to suggest that they do. Legitimacy, concerned with organisational conformity to a socially constructed set of norms (Suchman, 1995), is increasingly being theorised as a fluid and temporal concept (Cloutier & Langley, 2013; Gond, Leca & Cloutier, 2016; Suddaby, Bitektine & Haack, 2017) and so it is not surprising that 'polyphonic' (multi-vocal) social media settings might "pluralise discourses that construct legitimacy," (Etter et al., 2017, p.11). Aside from their strategic potential, social media offer conflicting interests, counter-discourses and even dissenting voices, and so they fundamentally transform, or at least challenge, how we understand legitimation processes (Schultz, Castelló & Morsing, 2013). Yet we still know very little about the micro-level processes of legitimation in these 'e-democratic' (Barros, 2014) and 'persistent' (boyd, 2014; Treem & Leonardi, 2013) communicative contexts and more poignantly, how these processes contribute to a new understanding of legitimation in fluid, open-ended and 'live' communication contexts (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In response, we ask, how can we understand organisational legitimation processes in social media communications?

To address this question, we adopt a dialogical view of discursive legitimation in organisation-led social media settings. Dialogue is defined as interactive moments of 'otherness' between two or more people (Holquist, 2002). An interest in online dialogue is building, particularly in social media contexts (Baralou & Tsoukas, 2015; Castelló, Etter & Nielsen, 2016). Yet, the dialogical lens on organisation-stakeholder communication is still, very much underdeveloped (Illia et al., 2015) and this issue is most pronounced within

institutional research that examines communication in legitimation processes (e.g. Lammers, 2011; Suddaby, 2011), most markedly at the level of discourse (Vaara & Tienari, 2008). In this paper, we address this gap bringing together two distinct (and so far, independently developed) literature streams around discursive legitimation (established within OS) and dialogue (established within communication theory). We draw upon Bakhtinian dialogism (1986) and Nikulin (2006) to examine the social media sites of two UK-based retailers: 'Ethical Organisation' (EO) and 'Low-Cost Retailer' (LCR) (pseudonyms given). In doing so, we unpack the role of social media in processes of legitimation and explore organisational attempts to 'control' the production of legitimacy knowledge, and legitimacy indicators (such as reputation), within stakeholder communications.

Our paper contributes to discursive legitimation research in three ways. First, we advance an 'allosensual' (Nikulin, 2006) view of dialogue that conceptualises legitimation as a process of *authorising*, *validating* and *finalising* discourse on legitimacy. Second, we describe the interrelated, overlapping nature of legitimation processes (such as moralisation, normalisation, authorisation and rationalisation), commonly treated as separate, distinct constructs (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016). Third, our allosensual lens illuminates how knowledge of legitimacy is socially constituted through the perpetuation of difference and dissent; this being a productive, not threatening, feature of organisation-stakeholder dialogue (Baralou & Tsoukas, 2015). This position provides a critical departure from both strategic (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990) and normative traditions in communication research (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006) that tend to react to dissent through consensus-building approaches.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. We outline legitimacy theorisation and the 'problem' of polyphony before introducing our alternative 'dialogical' pathway, which

we argue is a rich conceptual lens through which to examine discursive legitimation in social media (Bakhtin, 1986). In our research design, we abridge dialogical theory with the lens of discourse (Sullivan, 2012) to enable empirical analysis of discursive legitimation processes in our two social media 'texts' co-produced between organisations and stakeholders (Albu & Etter, 2015). We then present our findings and develop, in the discussion, our main contribution of an allosensual view of discursive legitimation in social media dialogue.

Organisational legitimacy and the problem of polyphony

Legitimacy is broadly understood as organisational conformity to a socially constructed set of norms, values beliefs and definitions (Suchman, 1995). It is a concept that has been researched through 'strategic' (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990) and 'institutional' lenses (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Within the institutional literature, the view of 'legitimacy-as-property' of two narrow actors (an organisation and its stakeholders) has developed into a broader conception of 'legitimacy-as-process', amongst multiple actors at a macro level (Suddaby et al., 2017). Studies have thus examined the social process through which legitimacy is 'established'; a communicative process of *legitimation* (Dowling, MacDonald & Protter 1983; Lammers, 2011; Patriotta, Gond & Schultz, 2011; Suddaby, 2011). Communications are conceived as risk-reducing reactions to the 'problem' of organisational *polyphony* (multi-vocal); the notion that communications about the respective il/legitimacy of an organisation are inherently subject to the interactions of a multiplicity of voices with competing interests (Bakhtin, 1984; Belova, King & Sliwa, 2008). Whilst it is appealing to think in line with Suchman (1995) that organisations can gain, maintain and/or defend legitimacy by strategically altering the context for communication, the prospects for communication

operating as a ‘true dialogue’ are limited by the parallel desire for control, consensus and consistency, particularly in social media settings (Schultz et al., 2013).

As questions over what is (and is not) legitimate are increasingly negotiated in more transparent online settings, amidst countervailing interests, the institutional literature conceptualises legitimation as a complex process of negotiation or ‘struggles’ between contradictory interests (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Zilber, 2007); struggles which require effective organisational ‘management’ to remove dissensual voices (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990). Any views that deviate from the idealised consensus and create ‘legitimacy crises’ in communications (Habermas, 1973) are seen as problematic and in need of repair; the pursuit of a moral ‘truce’ (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Patriotta et al., 2011). Subsumed within this view, is the assumption that organisations have the power to, albeit momentarily, influence and control their societal contexts and manipulate perceptions of legitimacy through communication (Scherer, Palazzo & Seidl, 2013). In order to ‘achieve’ legitimacy, competing interests across multiple stakeholder groups should be integrated through a rational discussion to establish a normative consensus (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). Polyphony is seen as a barrier to the strategic goal of aligning stakeholder expectations with organisational activity, causing Etter et al. (2017, p.3) to argue that, “conventional measures of organisational legitimacy capture a mere fraction of the plurality of citizens’ judgements.”

Contemporary institutional research offers some prospects for developing a more fluid, capacious and temporal understanding of legitimation in online ‘polyphonic’ contexts, exploring how organisations grapple with legitimacy amidst competing ‘logics’ (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), myths (Zilber, 2007), or by mobilising ‘orders of worth’ (Gond et al., 2016; Patriotta, Gond & Schultz, 2011; Suddaby et al., 2017). Examining the negotiation of

legitimacy in the context of disputes, such studies have equated legitimacy less with a binary distinction (legitimate/illegitimate) and more with concepts of 'appropriateness' or 'degrees of worthiness'; "beliefs, practices, actors, objects can be more or less legitimate depending on certain criteria," (Cloutier & Langley, 2013, p. 11). Scholars have thus encouraged examination of the constant 'work' required in legitimation processes to empirically illuminate the 'bottom up' practices that contribute to legitimation processes (Harmon, et al., 2015; Zilber, 2007). Of particular note, is empirical research into the discursive micro-strategies that contribute to legitimation processes at the textual level as discourses provide the 'frames' through which people make sense of particular legitimacy struggles (Erkama & Vaara, 2010; Joutsenvirta & Vaara, 2015; Riad, Vaara & Zhang, 2012). While highlighting the climates within which de/re/legitimation occurs, there have been calls for greater descriptive insight into the discursive processes, practices and strategies of legitimation at a micro-level (Vaara et al., 2006; Vaara & Tienari, 2008), particularly in relation to how these strategies might be interlinked (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016). Herein we propose that social media present a unique opportunity to forging a dialogical pathway within legitimacy theory.

Discursive legitimation as allosensual dialogue

Dialogical exchanges relate to interactive moments between two or more people; the 'self' and the 'other' (Holquist, 2002). Building upon a dialogical conception of communication, we can conceive legitimacy as a polyphonic, unfinalisable and non-linear process involving organisations and stakeholders with vested interests and agendas. To understand this way of dialogical thinking, and the implications it has for social media dialogue (and beyond), necessitates some appreciation of the contextual and processual characteristics of dialogue at the micro (discursive) level, for which we turn to Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), Dmitri Nikulin

(2006) and those organisational scholars whom have theorised organisations through a dialogic lens (Belova et al., 2008; Shotter, 2009; Sullivan & McCarthy, 2008). We structure our discussion around two themes: polyphony and dialogical processes.

The polyphonic context

The term polyphony has been empirically deployed to understand organisational contexts comprised of *multiple voices* competing for authority in dialogue, e.g. students in the classroom environment (Ramsey, 2008) or participants involved in organisational change scenarios (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2008; Hazen, 1993). These various settings are classed as polyphonic not just because of the *number of participants* joining the dialogue (e.g. classroom attendance), but by the presence of multiple and shifting positions that may be openly adopted by 'selves' and 'others' as "every speaking person speaks *to* and *for* the other… every sentence… is pronounced for the other," (Nikulin, 2006, p. 108). Dialogue dynamically relates the self to others through anticipating what can be said, what has been said and what will be said (Bakhtin, 1986). This describes the 'other'-orientated view of communication in which knowledge of a particular theme (e.g. legitimacy) is subjected to, "constantly changing understandings that change depending on one's *relation* to others," (Belova, 2008, p. 495). In relation to this, Bakhtin (1986, p. 68) argues,

> "The fact is that when the listener perceives and understands the meaning (the language meaning) of speech, he simultaneously takes an active responsive attitude toward it. He either agrees or disagrees with it (completely or partially), augments it, applies it, prepares for its execution, and so on… Any understanding of live speech, a live utterance, is inherently responsive…".

In the context of legitimacy, polyphonic organisational communications can be usefully thought of as a linguistic testing ground for one's own position/claims on what is (or is not legitimate) vis-a-vis those of others. However, this context does not aim at *producing* agreement, as per normative approaches (Habermas, 1984), as dialogue is revelatory of new, unanticipated positions that might be bought to bear upon legitimacy (Bakhtin, 1986). Crucially, polyphony for Bakhtin (1986), is not about directing these many voices towards one harmonious, consensual end, but to enable, "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses… [which] combine but are not merged in the unity of the event' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 6–7). In this vein, Ramsey (2008) concludes that in a 'polyphonic' MBA classroom, students shape dialogue by mobilising their own knowledge on a particular theme even if this (inevitably) ends in dissent and no clear, final agreement.

From this, it might be tempting to conclude that the 'e-democratic' (Barros, 2014) nature of social media is well suited to polyphonic dialogue. Social media, defined as Internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), blur traditional boundaries between production and consumption of information, and facilitate public available evaluations and collective reputational judgments (Etter, Ravasi & Colleoni, forthcoming; Orlikowski & Scott, 2014). They arguably expand the polyphonic setting, not just in allowing a greater number of individuals to participate, but by affording accessibility and continuity of dialogue across temporal boundaries (e.g. social media archives) and greater relational and content ties across online 'spaces' (e.g. 'liking' to content) (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). They transform knowledge sharing, "from an intermittent, centralised knowledge management process to a continuous online knowledge conversation of strangers, unexpected interpretations and re-uses, and dynamic emergence," (Majchrzak et al., 2013, p. 38). Such insights are particularly telling given the ostensibly performative nature of these

organisational 'texts' in constructing organisational identity/legitimacy (Albu & Etter, 2015; Blaschke, Schoeneborn & Seidl, 2012). However, if legitimacy is sought by attempts to reduce conflict, social media may represent spaces wherein endemic polyphony is silenced by dominant (if well intentioned) voices (Belova, 2008; Carter, Clegg, Hogan & Kornberger, 2003; Hindman, 2009); the pursuit and authorisation of the 'monolithic' organisational voice (Kuhn, 2008). So, whilst symbolically facilitating dialogue, social media may offer little more than technologically-mediated forums for symbolic communication 'management' (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990), where discordant voices are excluded (e.g. posts are deleted).

Such consensus-seeking, strategic approaches to 'gain' legitimacy via communications, may be better understood as *monological* (uni-directional) rather than dialogical (multi-directional). According to Bakhtin (1984, p. 293), "monologue is finalised and deaf to the other's response," and he critiques dominant views of communication as one-way, linear processes wherein words carry 'truth' or 'meaning' as objective entities. Therefore, in seeking a stable alignment between organisational activity and societal expectations ('legitimacy'), traditional views of communication may engender an institutional 'deafness' to the other by closing down other voices and positions. Such monological understanding is inherently *unproductive* as it, "shuts us off from the kinds of responsive understandings that can become available to us if we can allow ourselves to be open and responsive to their expressive movements," (Shotter, 2009, p. 519). In other words, dialogue is productive precisely because of the presence of dissent (polyphonic 'otherness') (Nikulin, 2006). It is on this point that we can now turn our attention from dialogical context to *process*, which we argue is productive of novel understandings of legitimacy in the new media age.

The process of dialogue: Consensus, dissensus and allosensus

Contrary to consensus-orientated, normative views on dialogue (Habermas, 1984), Bakhtin (1986) views dialogue as an unfinalisable process structured around dissensus between the 'self's' and 'other's' knowledge of a given theme. Dialogue is revelatory of alternate, conflicting knowledge positions that are unresolvable as participants are not predisposed to reach agreement upon the most valid truth presented but to ensure an open-ended exchange (Bakhtin, 1986). Any agreement within the dialogue may be considered accidental, temporal and potentially 'non-dialogical': "Agreement, no doubt, is possible in dialogue, but once it is achieved such agreement …becomes monological, and as such it is taken out of the dialogical," (Nikulin, 2006, p. 213). Nikulin (2006, p. 221) argues that consensus is unproductive or 'impoverished' because it, "cancels the very possibility of any continuation of the unfinalisable dialogical exchange".

In the context of legitimacy, dissent should not be diverted as it may be revelatory and productive of new organisational knowledge. This view aligns with recent works into the productive role of resistance and non-antagonistic conflict in online organisational communication (Castelló et al., 2016; Schultz et al., 2013). Thus, completing dialogue through either consensus (rational, total agreement) or dissensus (total dissension) is impossible Nikulin (2006, p. 222) argues, as dialogue is inherently *allosensual;* it is "inclusive of the possibility of difference with the other's position, with the other's other…". This builds on Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) assertion that dialogue is always in flux characterised by simultaneous unity and difference between 'centripetal' (homogeneity, centrality) and 'centrifugal' forces (dispersion, decentring) (Baxter, 2004). Therefore, rather than seeing organisational communications as harmonising of external and internal views, an 'editing-

out' of dissensus, we might usefully think of communication as an on-going, 'allosensual' process of stitching together organisational 'truths' on the subject of legitimacy.

This seemingly 'never ending' organisational story, has yet to be empirically pursued within the legitimacy literature to date. Recent sociological perspectives on key indicators of legitimacy such as corporate reputation(s) (Etter et al., forthcoming) and branding (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016) have forwarded the notion that organisations, and key intangible assets, might be constituted by dispersed voices or 'network narratives' in online contexts (Kozinets, 2010). Shifting away from *collective* communication (common meaning systems), towards more *connective* action (plurality of perspectives) (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), such literature might suggest that knowledge of legitimacy could be constructed via dispersed 'publics' offering various 'live' perspectives across online networks. Therein, shifting the lens away from *aggregated* assessments (Fombrun & van Riel, 1997) of legitimacy indicators (e.g. reputation and identity) as static and complete, towards dialogical *dis/aggregation* processes, we might better elucidate the challenges organisations experience in attempting to control stakeholder communications in online contexts. In sum, we lack insight into *how* legitimacy is socially constituted through micro-level processes in social media settings. We now set out the research design through which we address our research question: How can we understand organisational legitimation processes in new media communications?

Research Design

We followed well-established processes for collecting and analysing discourse as a constituted and constitutive phenomenon (Potter & Wetherell, 2001), building upon discursive research in legitimation contexts (e.g. Erkama & Vaara, 2010; Vaara et al., 2006),

but we tailored our data collection and analysis approach to social media (Barros, 2014) and our analytical dialogical interest (Sullivan, 2012). Public Facebook pages were selected as the social media sites of focus given the scale of Facebook (over 1.94 billion monthly active users, Facebook, 2017), high frequency of interactions with this 'social network' (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), rich textural cues (e.g. 'likes', 'shares'), as well as the lack of restriction on word limits for posts (Etter & Vestergaard, 2015). We conceptualised social networking sites as polyphonic, co-produced organisational 'texts' (Albu & Etter, 2015), as would be studies into more traditional organisational 'texts' such as media sources (e.g. Patriotta et al., 2011), press releases/organisational documents (e.g. Joutsenvirta & Vaara, 2015) and corporate advertorials (e.g. Livesey, 2002). The difference with our data is that it is 'live'; occurring through recurring topics and structured via posts *in dialogic interaction.*

Case context

Concentrating on food retailers; organisations that are commonly implicated in various legitimacy debates given their scale, complex supply chains and diverse corporate social responsibility (CSR) challenges, we selected two publically-available and contextually different social media 'texts', 'Ethical Organisation' (herein 'EO') and 'Low-Cost Retailer' (herein 'LCR') due to differences in value systems and communication styles (evidence of dialogue, see below) to ensure variety in discursive legitimation processes. EO is an organisation that has operated in the UK for over one hundred years, and today has around 5,000 high street stores. EO prides itself on its democratic ownership model, and although food retail is the main area of operation, the organisation also offers additional services including insurance and banking. At the time of data collection, EO's public Facebook page had been in operation for approximately three and a half years. EO initiated at least one post

per day receiving anywhere from a handful to hundreds of 'likes' and 'comments'. Posts tended to include commercial updates (e.g. new product launches) and CSR messages (e.g. position statements on topics of biodiversity). In comparison, LCR is a privately-owned company with a European heritage, arriving in the UK in the early 1990s. Focusing largely on a cost-value proposition, LCR focuses on food retail only in its 600 UK stores. At the time of data collection, LCR's social media site had been in operation for just two years. At least one post from the retailer appeared daily and the majority of posts were either commercial in nature, relating to product and service updates (e.g. discount 'alerts'), or trivial activities (e.g. competitions and quizzes). LCR posts received anything from a handful to 20-30 responses.

Data collection

We initially undertook non-participant observation to understand the dynamics between organisations and interlocutors in the social media sites and identify recurrent dialogical topics (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2012). From December 2012 to October 2013 the lead author regularly visited the social media sites and took detailed field notes, discussing and cross-referencing observations across the dialogues. A number of key topics emerged including, but not limited to, social issues (e.g. themes of animal welfare, sustainable sourcing) as well as environmental issues (e.g. plastic bag use, food waste), resulting in approximately twelve topics per retailer. Four reoccurring dialogical topics comprised of many conversation 'threads' were selected due to evidence of dialogic interaction between organisations and stakeholders (e.g. turn-taking through questions and answers) (Brennan, Merkl-Davies & Beelitz, 2013), as well as 'central', regularly reoccurring moral topics (see Erkama & Vaara, 2010). While every attempt was made to isolate topics, some overlap/leakage between topics occurred. The topics were then traced back from inception of

the sites (EO launched its site in Spring 2010 and LCR in Autumn 2011) to the time data collection ended (October 2013), extracting data using NVivo, qualitative data management and analysis software. In doing so we curated the core corpus of dialogical data upon which discourse/dialogical analysis ensued: 875 posts (EO) and 1086 posts (LCR). Table 1 provides descriptive detail of each of the eight selected dialogical topics (four per retailer), along with percentage frequency of organisational posts to interlocutor posts.

Interpreting and analysing dialogue at the level of discourse

Whilst Bakhtin (1986) and Nikulin (2006) offer a conceptual lens for describing dialogue at the level of discourse, there is little instruction for its analysis. Building upon our interest into the micro-level mechanics of social media dialogue, we see discourse as reflecting how reality is produced through multiple, shifting and shared meanings in relational interaction (Burman & Parker, 1993). We thus adopted a dialogical view of discourse analysis that appreciated dialogical subjectivity (self-other relations) (Bakhtin, 1986; Holquist, 1990; Sullivan, 2012). To clarify, discourse is our unit of analysis, and thus we build upon previous discursive legitimation scholarship (e.g. Vaara et al., 2006; van Leeuwen, 2007), but it is the 'utterance' (Bakhtin, 1986), or the social media 'post', that is the object of study, and we look at this in interaction with text posted prior to and following the post in question. Posts (or 'utterances') are thus of varied length (see Joutsenvirta & Vaara, 2015). We sought to identify elements of dialogue beyond turn-taking (questions/answers) as would be the focus of conversation analysis (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008), to look for deeper dialogical connections at the intrapersonal level, by examining who speaks, which points of view are presented, as well as the trajectory of dialogue (Beech, Macintosh & MacLean, 2010). This micro-level analysis involved identification of paraphrasing, indirect reporting (reference to

other texts/discourses), intertextuality (fragments of other texts/links) and double voiced discourse (evidence of more than one voice in a post) (Sullivan, 2012).

Analytical procedures

Akin to the 'Gioia methodology', we developed a three-stage process for analysing and coding the qualitative data (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013). The first stage involved identification of 1st order concepts through open coding, focusing on the specific *content* of the social media data sets. This broad, thematic analysis (Wodak, 2001), enabled us to determine the discursive processes of legitimation, distilling observations into fifteen descriptive concepts (Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 around here]

We then identified seven discursive themes within our data, namely our 2nd higher order categories. We were at this stage interested in interactions between the different themes as part of dialogue, focusing on the *form* of the discourse ('how' an argument is made). Here we adapted elements of van Leeuwen's (2007) 'grammar of legitimation' to our social media setting, examining discursive themes in four dialogic processes of authorisation, moralisation, normalisation and rationalisation. Through iterative reflection between data and theory, we refined authorisation to reflect how it was used 'personally' by stakeholders (van Leeuwen, 2007) and 'mythically' by the organisations (Wright & Nyberg, 2013) and focussed solely on the use of analogisation within moralisation (van Leeuwen, 2007). In addition, we developed themes of discursive antagonism and co-optation (Luyckx and Janssens, 2016).

The co-authors then coded discourse against these seven emergent themes, identifying organisational and stakeholder posts separately. Table 2 offers an overview of each of these

themes and their frequency within the data[1]. The frequencies are useful in providing descriptive statistics for our case, yet they must be viewed with caution as posts may be open to multiple interpretations. Finally, given that data may have been edited by the organisations controlling the sites of study, our interpretations offer a mere snapshot of reality at a moment in time. To counter these limitations, we provide evidence of our coding stages and exemplar posts in Tables 3 and 4, as well as 'sound bites' (Sullivan, 2012) from posts and dialogical chains of data throughout the analysis. Comments posted from any individual other than the organisational accounts are termed as 'interlocutor' posts.

[Insert Tables 2, 3 & 4 around here]

Finally, we determined overarching 3rd order theoretical dimensions that form the basis of our emergent framework of allosensual legitimation. Here we examined discourse in relation to the *function* that it served in dialogic interaction. First, we identified *discursive authorisation* to reflect how participants carved out voice rather than connect to external sources of authority (Vaara et al. 2006). Second, we identified the dynamic interplay of: normative appeals of the 'right thing to do' (Thomas & Lamm, 2012); moral alignment between organisational talk/action (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006); and rational substantiation through factual knowledge claims (Vaara & Tienari 2008), to form a new, aggregate dimension of *discursive validation*. Finally, we identified *discursive finalisation*, as dialogue was steered towards end-points through co-optation and antagonism (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016).

[1] Frequency of each theme is shown as a percentage of all posts by either the retailer or interlocutors. Total percentage can exceed 100% because multiple themes featured in some posts. Despite the 10% rule of thumb for indicating salience in discursive themes (Joutsenvirta & Vaara, 2015), we include personal authorisation in our study as it reflects a corollary to the prevalent theme of mythic authorisation used by the retailers. Any support/challenge of mythic identities by interlocutors was reflected in the theme of dialogical finality (co-optation and agnostic).

It is important to note that while we do not see our research as being sensitive (Lee, 1999; Solberg, 2010), we fully protected the rights of those we researched by following established ethical guidelines surrounding the collection and analysis of social media data (British Psychological Society [BPS], 2013; Ess, 2009; Townsend & Wallace, 2016) and published research in OS (e.g. Pritchard & Whiting, 2014). Pseudonyms were given to all actors to ensure anonymity (see Lawson, 2004) and we removed reference to identifying information through minor 'masking' or 'cloaking' of data. This involved the subtle alteration of text through changing word order and/or using synonyms to preserve meaning whilst avoiding traceability through search engines. In order to prevent cloaking from altering analytic interpretations (Pritchard & Whiting, 2014), we analysed raw data; cloaked posts are presented for illustrative purposes only. Reviewers of the paper were provided with selected posts in 'raw' and 'cloaked' form to validate our approach.

Findings: Discursive Legitimation in Social Media Dialogue

Our analysis revealed that discursive legitimation in social media dialogue involved three functions: *discursive authorising* (building personal and mythic credibility), *discursive validation* (building weight through normative appeals, moral analogisation and rational substantiation) and *discursive finalisation* (drawing dialogues towards an outcome through antagonism and/or co-optation). We see both retailers and interlocutors using these functions to differing effects, particularly in relation to the final dimension where LCR is more eager to exert control on the social media site by producing an agreed upon, legitimate position in dialogue through discursive antagonism (see Table 2). What is more unique in EO's case, is that the higher incidence of alternative forms of discursive validation (competing truth

claims) suggests a more 'allosensual' position and conceding of 'control'. EO's more dialogical context thus provides a richer understanding of legitimacy knowledge creation.

Discursive Authority

Discursive authorisation contributes to legitimation processes through the establishment of voice in polyphonic social media dialogue. We discovered two discursive themes of personal authorisation (interlocutors) and mythic authorisation (organisations) whereby 'selves' were authorised in relation to (anticipated) 'others' on topics of legitimacy (see Table 2).

Personal Authorisation. Personal authorisation contributes to legitimation processes by establishing interlocutor voice through connection to social roles/identities. More than simply describing the data set as polyphonic – 'attended' by many members (e.g. there were 36,869 'likes' for EO's page and 624,572 for LCR's page at the time the research was conducted[2]) – our analysis revealed how multiple 'voices' were taken up by interlocutors who wished to contribute to processes of legitimation. Here discursive 'weight' was added to voices through connection to social roles with particular vested interests in anticipation of responses from the 'other'. Posts often began with statements such as, "As a loyal customer…", "As an employee…", "As a farmer…", "As a woman…" and "As a Dad…". In the post below (to LCR), personal authorisation fuses together national sovereignty with consumer rights, to leverage James' rational request for information:

> **James:** As a British consumer, I want to make informed choices about the product I buy. Can I request that you clearly identify which products are halal certified…?

[2] Data were extracted from social media sites on 12th August 2013 (EO) and 22nd October 2013 (LCR).

In EO's social media site, Jeannie lists the various identity positions to which she associates, culminating in her assertion that she is a loyal 'fan' of the organisation. This provides a legitimate base upon which she requests that the organisation revisit its association with a particular newspaper on the grounds of gender objectification. The question 'why' reveals double voiced dialogue; dialogue between Jeannie and an anticipated 'other':

> **Jeannie:** I am a member of EO, I have an EO internet current account… my husband has an EO current account and my daughters have EO current accounts… In short, I am an extremely loyal fan of EO. Why? Because EO is one of the main ethical organisation in the UK... I do not agree with images of nude women in The Sun newspaper. I believe that this undermines the respect and equality that women deserve…

Mythic Authorisation. Mythic authorisation contributes to legitimation processes by establishing organisational voice through connection to symbolic values and organisational myths. While EO and LCR were already 'in' the dialogue (social media sites are 'owned' by the retailers), mythic authorisation was evident and enacted in different ways. EO assumed authority as a democratically-run corporate 'citizen' with posts invoking a sense of consistency across temporal boundaries (the historical, current and future self). Visuals (e.g. photographs of old stores) and discursive features (e.g. words such as 'always', 'tradition' and 'roots') conveyed retrospective heritage in moral business practice, and current practice was frequently referred to (e.g. "We have carrier bag recycling bins in larger stores…"). Symbolic, forward-looking commitments were also made (e.g. "We are reviewing our current situation… the result of which will be announced early in the new year"). This suggests that moral (legitimate) practices transcend time (a notion Bakhtin, 1986 refers to as 'the chronotope'), reinforcing a consistent and 'controllable' view of legitimacy:

> **EO:** Hi Gavin, As a retailer for the community, we have listened to your concerns... We are in continual dialogue with our customers and members, and will review the policy as necessary – Benji

Unlike EO, LCR did not connect to a moral/social role through mythic authorisation, but instead reinforced its consistent commitment to everyday low-cost retailing. Organisational

posts took the form of public service broadcasts, being labelled as 'news', 'updates', 'alerts' and 'announcements', and regularly addressed the 'other' as a collective of supportive individuals; 'Happy Friday LCR-followers!' Yet, far from using the social media site as an organisational voicebox (taking 'to'/ 'at'), LCR juxtaposed formal language (authoritative 'tone') alongside emotive superlatives (friendly 'tone'), to personify the organisation and seemingly level out communications (talking 'with' stakeholders), yet still maintaining a communication hierarchy (disseminating controlled communications):

> **LCR:** ***News Alert!***
> We are really excited to announce that we have teamed up with [charity] as our new charity partner. We will be working with [charity] to raise funds…

Discursive Validation

Discursive validation contributes to legitimation processes by mobilising organisational/ interlocutor positions through connection to normative, moral and rational evidence. Here knowledge of legitimacy was negotiated between 'self' and active 'others' in social media dialogues, with discursive validation more prominent within EO's social media site (Table 2).

Normative appeals. Normative appeals (what *ought* to be) contribute to legitimation processes by presenting a professed (superior) moral high ground on matters of legitimacy (e.g. "I hate plastic bags, they *should be* banned…"). Offering one clear interpretation of the 'legitimate' thing to do, here discursive validation was connected to the individual moral compass by customers and other stakeholders. In lieu of the contextual cues of face-to-face dialogue (e.g. facial expressions), expressive and descriptive imagery was often drawn upon to add extra discursive weight to normative appeals, as well as capital letters and punctuation e.g. "DON'T DO IT EO!!!" (on the topic of animal welfare). In the context of story-telling, organisations could be constructed as potential 'heroes' (in doing the 'right/legitimate' thing)

as well as 'villains' (in continuing current practice, i.e. doing the 'wrong/illegitimate' thing), in support of de/legitimation processes. This was particularly pervasive in the topic of fireworks where LCR was constructed as an (illegitimate) villain whose actions not only fall short of normative expectations (to protect consumers), but also contribute to the harm of vulnerable members of society. See below how normative appeals are mobilised to delegitimise LCR and offer a more suitable (legitimate) path in the absence of LCR voice:

> **Angela:** Fireworks should be banned and only displays that are formally organised should be allowed...
>
> **Claire:** I'm not a spoilsport but fireworks cause so much distress for animals. I would ban them…
>
> **Judy:** Lovely next few weeks with a distraught dog - cheers LCR
>
> **Peter:** Shameful!! I agree with Claire, fireworks should be banned and only organised displays should be allowed. I am shocked to see that they are on sale in supermarkets already! These supermarkets are a disgrace - so many humans and animals are hurt and killed each year from fireworks! It is almost as if they condone the injuring and the deaths???
>
> **Florence:** It would be great for LCR to set a good example to the other supermarkets and STOP the sale of fireworks. I agree with other comments – only licensed companies should be allowed to purchase fireworks for organised displays. It is all about the MONEY!!
>
> **Gigi:** Fireworks should be banned!!! It's the poor animals I feel sorry for

Moral analogisation. Moral analogisation contributes to legitimation processes by revealing logical inconsistencies between (internal) organisational rhetoric (talk) and reality (action), as well internal/external talk and action. In the saturated retail marketplace, moral misalignment provided a basis for dissent, delegitimising organisations and provoking further dialogue. For instance, interlocutors commented on how they were peering through LCR's "smoke screen" in identifying misalignment between commitments to animal welfare and its actions in selling kangaroo meat. Within EO's site, interlocutors drew temporal contrasts between historically (high) and currently (lower) levels of moral activity, e.g. "You have an excellent record with your positive ethics in your history, please carefully consider…". EO's moral position is challenged in the below dialogue on biodiversity with interlocutors paraphrasing evidence, posing further questions and ridiculing the 'corporate' nature of EO's post. Here organisational words are shaped into a new context, undermining organisational 'legitimacy',

despite initial communications being tightly controlled (Sullivan. 2012). EO responds, morally analogising its legitimate activities against those of 'less' legitimate other retailers:

> **EO:** Following on from the announcement of [European Commission statement on pesticides]… we released this statement on Monday. Through our Biodiversity campaign we have been urging that [issue] be taken more seriously since 2006. We welcome the approach from the European Commission and the temporary ban…
>
> **William:** Happy to hear that EO has been campaigning since 2006 on this issue, but why welcome the temporary ban, when impartial studies have decisively proved that pesticides are harmful…?
>
> **Kevin:** Why not take a stand EO and start a signature campaign to present to our government, at the minimum, be committed if you actually believe in something rather than just provide additional weak marketing ploys/statements. To make change for the better taking action is needed. Do you believe in biodiversity or not? Words mean nothing without action and the direct involvement of your customers.
>
> **EO**: Kevin, are you bring ironic? We have been active on this issue before [NGO] and we have won awards for our actions... I know that you don't shop with us but maybe ask which supermarket you do shop at what they are doing…

Rational substantiation. Rational substantiation contributes to legitimation processes by providing sources of internal and external evidence to add greater validity to arguments. Drawing on human (e.g. discussions with employees) and non-human (e.g. links to relevant legislation) sources, legitimation processes involve a rich tapestry of truth claims. As seen below, the topic of gender objectification in EO's social media site captures internal and external rational substantiation, through material (organisational websites) and immaterial (organisational myths). Strong connections drawn between earlier posts (see 'Women's Politics'), evidence dialogue beyond turn-taking and reveal how legitimacy is defended (Paula), challenged (Richard) and potentialised (Ellen) in the absence of a present organisational voice. Here we see how dissent is productive not just in revealing different conceptions of legitimacy (remaining politically neutral vs. preventing gender objectification) but also in revealing the boundaries of legitimacy on a particular topic (e.g. does EO support gender objectification by selling a particular newspaper?):

> **Paula:** Epidemic proportions are being reached now. Removing advertising on the principles stated in this and other threads is a political act i.e. Women's Politics…I believe that EO is maintaining its principle to be politically neutral.

Richard: It is not politically neutral to support a newspaper that contains an objectifying and sexist image of a woman and this isn't just 'Women's Politics' either …Please see Bill's post above or read this http…

Cathy: If 51% are regularly objectified, all of society is affected…I want the removal of sexist images in newspapers for my daughter but also for my son so that the two of them grow up without an image that each day reinforces that a woman's role in society is to be sexually attractive...

Denny: Also, Richard I must add that EO has a long history of supporting 'Women's Politics' http…

Ellen: It would be amazing for EO to support this campaign! As a parent of a 9 year old I am totally disappointed that the newspaper is still available on shelves at a child's eye level. It is humiliating and upsetting…As an ordinary woman and parent, I ask that at the very least EO PLEASE put the paper on the top shelf with the other porn. It is porn. This would be 'Politically fair'.

Frank: Ellen, porn depicts sex acts. Would not label it porn

Frank: por·nog·ra·phy / pôrˈnägrəfē / Noun, Printed or visual material containing the explicit description or display of sexual organs or activity.

Discursive Finalisation

Discursive finalisation contributes to legitimation processes by singularising authorised voices and harmonising differing validity positions in the pursuit of an ultimate 'controlled' consensus. While discourses of antagonism (silencing dissent; self over others) and co-optation (promoting consensus; self-other alignment) are inherently 'monological' in quashing 'otherness' and steering communications towards consensual (legitimate) terrain, we find allosensual social media dialogues to be resistant to finalisation attempts. Rather than closing down dialogue, we discursive finalisation is fleeting and productive of new dialogue.

Discursive antagonism. Discursive antagonism contributes to legitimation processes through the paradoxical suppression and amplification of dissenting voices in the pursuit of consensus (the 'achievement' of legitimacy). Here authorisation is stifled, validation is minimised, and dialogue is taken 'out of the dialogic' (Nikulin, 2006), leaving little room for questioning legitimacy as unwanted voices and positions are removed. We found different pathways to finalise dissent in each retailer context.

EO primarily deflected dissent by reinforcing mythic authority (e.g. "…we have listened to the concerns of our customers…") and a sense of shared responsibility towards moral ills (e.g. "we are in this together"). While interlocutors are regularly encouraged to, "tell us what you think…", far from encouraging a level-playing field, EO also ensures that its 'presence' is felt, providing 'warning' posts such as, "we just wanted to inform you, we are keeping a close eye on this…". LCR takes discursive antagonism further than such symbolic statements, providing a more direct approach to deflecting dissent through ignoring posts, leaving questions unanswered and issuing threats of exclusion: "We like hearing everyone's thoughts but we do not tolerate these sorts of comments – such posts will be deleted and this may result in users being banned…" Discourse has not reached a natural point of finalisation here, but voices and perspectives from dialogical 'others' are prematurely silenced, providing room for arguments to resurface in the future. This is particularly visible in politically charged topics where organisational boundaries are truly tested. As seen below, attempts to discursively finalise discourse through non-response on the part of LCR move rational discourse into emotive territory, enflaming dissent as interlocutors feel that they are not being listened to. This produces new dialogue as topics are moved into broader domains, but ostensibly reside around a fixed (monological) view: that of organisational *illegitimacy*:

> **Anton:** Dear LCR:
> 1) Has your policy against [supporting national cause] changed over the last two days?
> 2) Do you intend to issue a press release to that effect?
> 3) Is it true you erased a post and blocked a user?
>
> **Rod:** I would be interested in hearing an answer to Anton's first question. Has your policy in relation to [national cause] changed?
>
> **Anton:** I find it really rude to just delete our posts when asking a simple question, asking why you don't support [national cause]. Surely there must be better ways to reply than deleting and blocking
>
> **Laura:** I was banned from the LCR page for asking this question,
> Can you please tell me why your staff are not allowed to support [national charity]? Will this post also be removed and will I be banned from this page?? I will be taking this matter further…
> **Anton:** Could someone answer my question please.....
>
> **LCR:** Hi Anton, no staff at LCR have been instructed to not support [national cause]

Anton: Thank you for your reply. So why are LCR being so aggressive? I feel it is disrespectful, deleting posts and banning people…just for asking a question. I have been told that it is true, LCR have told employees to not support [national cause]. Please can you confirm?

Anton: Why has it taken so long for a reply?

Harry: Just do not shop at LCR

Discursive Co-optation. Discursive co-optation contributes to legitimation processes through the levelling of dissenting voices in the pursuit of consensus (the 'achievement' of legitimacy). Organisations are in a seemingly strong position to suppress discursive authority and validity by steering interlocutors towards consensus ('legitimacy') as seen below. Shared discursive cues (e.g. smiley face emoticons) and reference to 'others' by name seemingly culminate in a single, collective (monological) and controllable voice (little 'otherness'):

LCR: Good morning LCR-fans!
We just wanted to say a huge 'thank you!' to all LCR fans who have bought our yummy Clarabel Cupcakes in January. 15p from every pack bought this month will be donated to our amazing charity partner…Stay tuned to find out how much is raised :-)

Jenny: *--*

Adele: I am so pleased you are supporting [charity]... THANK YOU LCR :)

LCR: Lovely to hear that Adele. We are proud to support their work :-)

Adele: Thank you for your reply… very unexpected… Wish LCR were in Hillborough

Dave: We LCR a lot

While such moments may inhibit the continuation and enrichment of dialogue, our data found that such temporary moments of consensus can facilitate further dialogue, being used as leverage to introduce new themes or expand further on existing ones. As seen below, momentary consensus is achieved between EO's organisational policy and practices on animal rights (animals are here, the invisible 'others') through the confirmation of installation of CCTV in slaughterhouses. This 'consensual' moment, however, becomes an opportunity to identify moral inconsistencies elsewhere, bringing other dissenting voices and vantage points to bear on legitimacy. This perpetuates dialogue, moving monologue into dialogue:

EO: For those of you who have been waiting for an update on our intentions regarding CCTV in slaughterhouses, take a look at our Facebook page for the latest http…

Andy: Amazing news EO, a big thank you!!!!!!! from me and the animals!
Chris: EO, can you feel the love??? Now that you [other retailers] are installing CCTV in slaughterhouses we only have to concentrate on [other retailers] who so far won't. It's their loss and your gain.... I will not spend money in [other retailers] until they get CCTV. You, EO, will get all my money!!!! xxxx

Kay: Well done EO incredible news and a win for the animals, now you are truly showing compassion for animals…thanks again from 2 very loyal and happy customers:)

Ben: This is good for animal rights now what about human/ trade union rights for EO workers? Halal is much crueller than established slaughter… food should be labelled if it is halal so that we can boycott it, like GMO!..

Lottie: Halal slaughter is not any way worse than regular methods. Being stunned and bleeding to death can never be 'humane', it will always be an unnecessary death.

EO: Hi, our insistence on pre-stunning applies uniformly to any halal meat we sell

Lottie: Pre-stunned or not, I will not eat halal. Labels please!!

Emily: …I'm with Lottie. Labels please so that I can boycott halal.

Bill: Halal and kosher - two of the most brutal techniques for slaughter - DON'T DO IT EO. Please remain compassionate. Thank you

Bill: The selling of Halal meat is going against [national act]. It is a disgusting, evil, and cruel way to slaughter animals that does not belong in any Christian country. When I became a customer of EO it was because of the noble Christian things they stood for!... EO is a British company and should act in that manner!!!

Given its acquiescence, EO appears to be acting legitimately in relation its own values and societal norms (e.g. this is a 'true' commitment), encouraging co-optive discursive cues which point to friendship and patronage. However, at this precise moment of controlled consensus, other voices and positions reveal unresolved inconsistencies related to broader themes (e.g. employee rights), thus leveraging dissensus, producing new views on legitimacy and perpetuating dialogue further; the 'allosensual' dialogue (Nikulin, 2006). We now reflect on these insights and draw together the contributions of this paper.

Discussion: Allosensual Dialogue and Discursive Legitimation

This study contributes to the discursive legitimation literature by focusing on the dialogical

(Bakhtin, 1981, 1986) nature of legitimation processes between organisations and stakeholders. We have highlighted that discursive legitimation processes are 'never-ending', allosensual processes in social media settings, comprised of three core dimensions of authorisation, validation and finalisation. Here we develop and generalise these dimensions to elucidate how social media settings shape organisational legitimation processes, reflecting on the practical implications for organisations wishing to remain in 'control' of online stakeholder communications, and offering avenues for further research in OS.

Discursive Authority: Voice in response to polyphony

As organisational social media sites allow multiple 'authors' the opportunity to participate in 'never-ending stories' of legitimation, they crucially bring consensual/dissensual voices *within* organisational online communications*,* rather than deflecting them *outside* organisational platforms to peripheral echo-chambers. It has been argued that organisational 'texts' are co-produced through multiple and shifting voices in online contexts (Albu & Etter, 2015) and our findings certainly illuminate the 'polyphonic' (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986) nature of social media sites due to their accommodation of a greater range of voices and positions on topics of legitimacy. Yet, the theme of discursive authority illuminates much more than how voices are included in, and contribute to, legitimation processes as it identifies how participants vie to earn authority and establish 'selves' in response to 'others', thus emphasising subjectivity in the dialogical social media climate (Bakhtin, 1986; Holquist, 1990; Sullivan, 2012). Our findings align with recent studies of institutional theory and orders of worth (Cloutier et al., 2017; Suddaby et al., 2017), by emphasising agency at the individual, micro-level and how discursive weight is added to identity positions in the face of diffuse 'publics' (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016) and disembodied social media interactions.

While authority is dispersed in this setting allowing multiple and dynamic reputational images (Etter et al., forthcoming), this process can inspire greater creativity around organisational activities (Girard & Stark, 2002). We see rich potential in unpacking the role of power in social media settings oft-perceived as 'democratic' (Hindman, 2009). Which voices/views are included and/or suppressed within the dialogue, and why? What are the opposing discourses initiated by various voices as 'the never-ending story' is shaped and twisted in different directions? Additionally, as mythic authorisation has unveiled how legitimacy is judged through current actions/identity, as well as prior actions/identity, social media are viable settings for considering how individual organisations become 'hostages to fortune' in legitimacy contexts, as well as the temporal reputational 'commons' that might exist across OS contexts (King, Lenox & Barnett, 2002).

Discursive Validation: Truth in a 'hypertextual' climate

At the click of a button, participants in social media settings can include 'hypertextual' links (e.g. websites) (Albu & Etter, 2016) to build credibility around legitimacy knowledge claims. We consequently find that social media provide rich tapestries of de/legitimacy knowledge, with stakeholders drawing upon different kinds of moral, rational and normative evidence to validate opinions, offering an integrative discussion of modes of legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). Knowledge verification is a particularly pertinent technique in today's 'post-truth' era where margins between fact and fiction are increasingly blurred and boundaries around what is in and outside of organisational communicative control are truly tested. We reveal the intricate processes of contestation that lay behind legitimacy judgements, contributing to discursive legitimation research within OS by empirically filling in the content of 'network narratives' (Kozinets, 2010), or the plotlines that exist within 'never ending' dialogical

stories of legitimation. Indeed, while previous research has highlighted the role of competing knowledge claims in organisational attempts to communicate a 'legitimate' view to stakeholders (Barros, 2014; Livesey, 2002), extant research often presents knowledge claims as disaggregated and asynchronous, operating over an indistinct period of time (Dahan & Gittens, 2010). Dialogically speaking they lack the property of the 'chronotope' (Bakhtin, 1986; Sullivan, 2012), with contested truths being temporally and spatially scattered. In contrast, our data reveals a '*hyper*-chronotopicality'; an ability for legitimacy truths to be mobilised and continually refined in 'live' and transparent self-other dialogue, potentially opening organisations up to greater (and quicker) scrutiny. As online processes of legitimation are subject to allosensual *connective*, rather than consensual *collective* action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), we illuminate how individuals in social media contexts engage with a plurality of moral orders and logics (Cloutier et al., 2017; Patriotta et al., 2011).

We encourage further examination of the 'hypertextual' and 'hyper-chronotopical' cues surrounding processes of legitimation, revealing how fragments of text are absorbed into social media dialogue and how social media dialogues are absorbed into other organisational 'spaces.' For instance, how are social media dialogues operationalised into wider decision-making processes around legitimacy at organisational/societal levels? How do communicative events (e.g. crises) shape this process during situations when organisational control is truly 'tested' (Patriotta et al., 2011)?

Discursive Finalisation: Allosensus through productive dissent

In social media contexts, the production, consumption and dissemination of knowledge happens simultaneously and in a seemingly less hierarchical manner than traditional

organisational ‘texts’ (such as press releases) (Orlikowski & Scott, 2014). While communicative ‘control’ is acquiesced by organisations (in terms of managing content), organisations benefit by being party to the continual unfolding of the live and never-ending organisational story. Our ‘allosensual’ (Nikulin, 2006) understanding of dialogue thus adds further insight into notions of narrative temporality within OS enquiry (Cunliffe, Luhman & Boje, 2004) and the co-creation of stories (Gabriel & Connell, 2010), by presenting social media site as ‘petri-dishes’ for organisational learning of external knowledge claims. A proactively cultivated ‘petri dish’ may offer valuable insight not only into dissent per-se, but also its trajectories and momentary conclusions, potentially anticipating future policy changes, public sentiment and reputational weak spots (‘legitimacy crises,’ Habermas, 1973). Comparative research into the interaction between disaggregated reputational images formed within social media petri-dishes and aggregated evaluations of reputation(s) ascertained through broader media study, may provide further insight into legitimation processes in new media settings (Etter et al., forthcoming; Fombrun & van Riel, 1997).

Furthermore, contrary to received wisdom which has focussed on dissent and polyphony being dissolved through a carefully controlled consensus, the pool of ‘legitimacy knowledge’ is continually enriched through fluid, temporal and dissensual means in social media settings (Cloutier & Langley, 2013; Gond et al., 2016). Research that views legitimation as a moral process of consensual, norm building – reaching agreement on what ought to be (Suchman, 1995) – might be considered as an inherently monological project, singularising voice (authority) and positions (validity), despite its utility in balancing the interests of different stakeholders. To further elaborate on the dialogical context of legitimation, we advocate interrogation of the relationship between discursive authority and validity, through examining how distinctions are made between organisational character and capability over time (see

Mishina, Block & Mannor, 2011). Longitudinal study of the trajectories of thematic dialogues may reveal the valence of different dimensions of allosensual dialogue and crucial insight into organisational relinquishing of communicative control in social media and other organisational settings.

Conclusion

This paper has provided empirical insight into how we might better understand organisational legitimation processes in social media communications. In doing so, it has forwarded a dialogical and 'allosensual' (Nikulin, 2006) view of discursive legitimation in social media settings that conceptualises legitimation as an inherently discursive process involving the authorisation of voice, the validation of truth claims and the finalisation of dialogue through temporary consensus. Through analysis of two organisational-led social media settings, our findings elaborate on the social construction of knowledge on legitimacy through the perpetuation of difference and dissent. We contribute to discursive legitimation studies (e.g. Vaara et al., 2006; Vaara & Tienari, 2008) by describing processes of legitimation at the micro-discursive level, elucidating the interrelated, overlapping and dialogical nature of legitimation processes commonly treated as separate, distinct constructs. The research climate is ripe for further investigations into processes of legitimation in increasingly interactive contexts (Harmon et al., 2015). We hope that this study, its theoretical focus and avenues for further research, will stimulate future research around the dialogical dynamics of organisational communication and discursive legitimation in new media settings.

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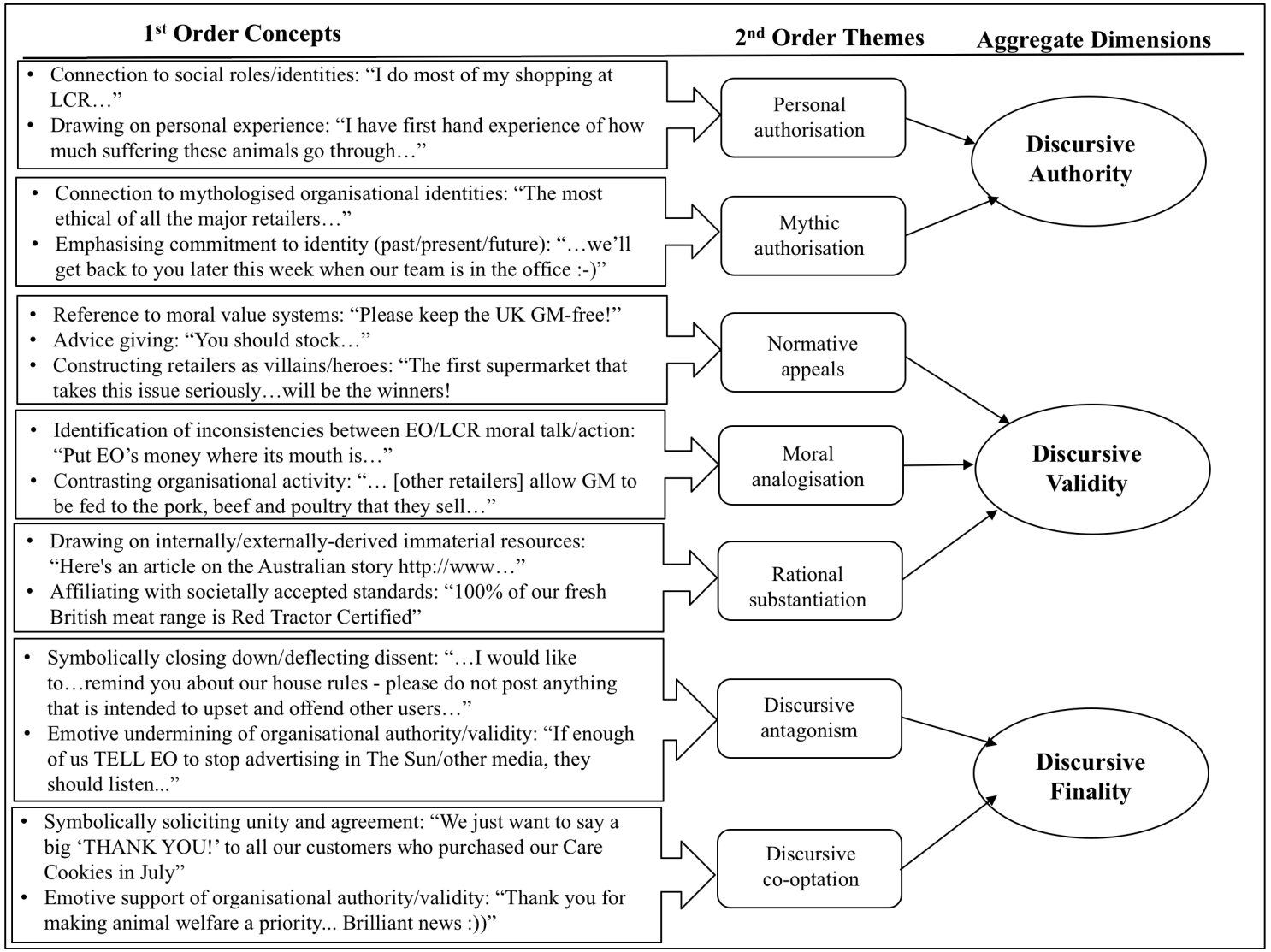
Figure 1: Data Structure



Tables

Table 1: Descriptive detail on EO and LCR dialogues with percentage frequency of organisational posts to interlocutor posts

Retailer	Dialogue Topic	Dialogue Overview	n*	Organisational Posts	Interlocutor Posts
LCR	***Animal welfare***	Ethicality of the sale of certain meat products (e.g. kangaroo meat) and the inhumane treatment of animals as part of religious rituals. Dialogue is linked to industry practice, religious doctrines, vegetarianism and the British context. Stakeholders contest LCR's approach to animal slaughter.	234	26%	74%
	Charitable giving	Fundraising activities (mostly related to the current charity partner) and community support regarding charitable giving. Dialogue is linked to charitable causes and personal experience. Stakeholders contest the organisation's altruistic efforts.	498	18%	82%
	Fireworks/ consumer safety	The safety and environmental issues of fireworks and LCR's responsibility towards customer safety. Stakeholders support the sale of fireworks or encourage LCR to ban the sale of fireworks.	274	14%	86%
	Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO)	Concerns around GMO. Dialogue is linked to health concerns and the social and environmental impacts of GMO with stakeholders encouraging LCR to stop selling products that are linked to GMO.	80	26%	74%
EO	***Animal welfare***	The inhumane treatment of animals in UK slaughterhouses. Dialogue is linked to legislation, industry practice, religious doctrines and vegetarianism. Stakeholders encourage EO to employ CCTV surveillance in their slaughterhouses.	89	20%	80%
	Biodiversity	The diminishing bee population and how to encourage biodiversity. Dialogue linked to the environment, climate change, legislation, industry practice, GMO, bee keeping, science and gardening. There is support for EO's approach, although many encourage a more aggressive stance on lobbying.	229	26%	74%
	Gender objectification	The objectification of women in 'lads mags' and 'The No More Page 3' (NMP3) campaign launched to boycott The Sun newspaper and its daily topless female photo. Dialogue is linked to pornography, gender equality, domestic abuse, religion, censorship, health, children, politics, gay rights and popular culture. Stakeholders contest EO's potential involvement in the campaign.	414	6%	94%
	Plastic bag use	The environmental impact of plastic bag usage and incentivisation of bag re-usage. Dialogue linked to the environment, biodegradable products, waste, recycling, industry practice, behaviour change and cost. Stakeholders encourage EO to reduce its use of plastic bags.	63	21%	79%

* Total number of posts within the social media data set from LCR (Low Cost Retailer) and EO (Ethical Organisation). 'I' denotes posts from other interlocutors.

Table 2: Definitions, examples and percentage frequency of discursive themes used by EO, LCR and interlocutors

Discursive theme	Definition	Example	n*	Frequency
Personal authorisation	Actors in whom institutional authority of some kind is vested, focused upon connection to individual social roles/identities (van Leeuwen, 2007).	"Hi LCR. I prefer to shop with you than any other supermarket, but what is your stance on GMO produce?"	***LCR:*** 210 ***LCR (I):*** 876 ***EO:*** 138 ***EO (I):*** 737	LCR (I): 1% EO (I): 4%
Mythic authorisation	Symbolic narratives that address political conditions or criticism facing society and connect to activities that go beyond accumulation of private wealth/material standards (Wright & Nyberg, 2013).	"Animal welfare is a priority for us - in 1990 we were the first retailer to adopt [ethical produce scheme]... In 2001, we were the first retailer to be awarded [ethical label]…In 2008 we received [ethical award]…"		LCR: 51% EO: 57%
Normative appeals	Rendering specific actions as 'normal' or 'natural', in relation to societal expectations (Vaara & Tienari, 2008)	"…We know that you will take the next step with CCTV in slaughterhouses… we also all know that you EO will do the right thing. We look forward to a quick reply so that we can relax!!!!"		LCR (I): 6% EO (I): 12%
Moral analogisation	Moralisation: Legitimation through connection to moral value systems (van Leeuwen, 2007). Analogisation: Comparisons in discourse that have legitimatory/delegitimatory function systems (van Leeuwen, 2007).	"Hi all, we prefer to reduce the usage of bags without charging. This has worked pretty well up to now, with numbers down over 70%. This is more than any other retailer (that doesn't charge)…"		LCR: 0% LCR (I): 2% EO: 1% EO (I): 10%
Rational substantiation	The utility of specific actions based on knowledge claims that are accepted in a given context as relevant (Vaara & Tienari, 2008, van Leeuwen, 2007)	"Hi Clara…you can read blogs by our trainee eco warriors here: http…for details of local eco warrior associations please see this link on our website: http… Jemima"		LCR: 23% LCR (I): 10% EO: 29% EO (I): 15%
Discursive antagonism	Delegitimatising through explicit debate and refutation of criticism (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016)	"Your hypocrisy in supporting [national awards ceremony] but refusing to let your staff participate is just sickening. I am sure that you will delete this post very soon"		LCR: 18% LCR (I): 18% EO: 2% EO (I): 20%
Discursive co-optation	Legitimatising occurring through staging previous opponents as partners (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016)	"Choosing [charity] as your 'Charity of the Year' means that together we can help provide a healthier future for all…"		LCR: 61% LCR (I): 22% EO: 54% EO (I): 11%

* Total number of posts within the social media data set from LCR (Low Cost Retailer) and EO (Ethical Organisation). 'I' denotes posts from other interlocutors in the sites.

Table 3: Concepts, themes and dimensions of legitimation: Low Cost Retailer (LCR)

Producer	Concept	Theme	Dimension	Example
Interlocutor	**N/A**	**N/A**	**N/A**	Could you please let me know which (if any) of your products contain GMO or are grown from GMO seeds? Thanks…
LCR	**Connection to mythologised identity**	**Mythic authorisation**	**Discursive authority**	Hi Bob, I can confirm that our own brand products do not contain GMO, and that no products are grown from GMO seeds
Interlocutor	**Supporting organisational validity**	**Discursive co-optation**	**Discursive finality**	Cheers - good to know. Do any of the other branded products you sell contain GMO… if yes, which ones?
LCR	**Symbolically deflecting dissent**	**Discursive antagonism**	**Discursive finality**	Hi Bob, please get in touch with individual brands regarding their processes and products
Interlocutor	**Supporting organisational authority**	**Discursive co-optation**	**Discursive finality**	Hi again nice LCR social media team. Could you please answer my last question please? Many thanks
Interlocutor	**Emotive questioning**	**Discursive antagonism**	**Discursive finality**	2 months (15th April) and still no answer to a really important question about what you know about the products you are selling to your customers. It is not good - especially as this is such an important topic. Is it? I don't want to be a pain - but please can I have an answer to my question? Should I go to each of the manufacturers of the branded products that you sell to ask each of them about GMO ingredients? If this is recommended, is this because you don't know if they contain GMO ingredients or not? I have been a frequent customer - but I shall not be back until you answer.
LCR	**Connection to mythologised identity**	**Mythic authorisation**	**Discursive authority**	Hi Bob, LCR own brand products are free from GMO, including own brand products sold during themed weeks. We do not list all of the branded products that we sell and so I would suggest that you contact the individual brands.
Interlocutor	**Comparisons between retailers/ advice giving/ accusations**	**Moral analogisation/ Discursive antagonism**	**Discursive validity/finality**	OK thanks. I asked [retailer] too and I received the same answer. I think that I don't really understand why you don't use GM in your own brand (there should be a reason why not, e.g. because customers do not like it), but also why you do not provide additional information about any products that you sell that contain GMO, or that you dont even know! Yes this is not easy when stock lines change a lot, but providing a simple list on your website that could be updated based on manufacturer details would be enough. Do you actually ask your suppliers if they are using GMO - or are stock decisions purely based on price, demand and availability? Many thanks.

Table 4: Concepts, themes and dimensions of legitimation: Ethical Organisation (EO)

Producer	Concept	Theme	Dimension	Example
Interlocutor	**Inconsistency**	**Moral analogisation**	**Discursive validation**	What is EO doing about reducing plastic shopping bag use in its stores? I hoped that you would take the lead but I have not seen anything obvious when I visit my local store... Have you considered an incentive to use our own bags, as seen at other supermarkets?
EO	**Drawing on (internal) resources**	**Rational substantiation**	**Discursive validation**	Hi Jenny, thanks for your post, carrier bag recycling bins are now available in our larger stores for customers to return their carrier bags/polythene film items. We also sell certified carrier bags that are home-compostable at 5p in some stores….
Interlocutor	**Drawing on (internal) resources**	**Rational substantiation**	**Discursive validation**	A report from last year said that biodegradable bags aren't as 'green' as people think, many companies have decided to stop using them. In case you haven't seen the company's page on carrier bags Jenny it's here: http://www.eo…
Interlocutor	**Reference to value systems**	**Normative appeals**	**Discursive validation**	And whenever I go to your store in Barlow I keep being asked if I would like my shopping double bagged not one bag but TWO bags, why WHY are you still giving away bags, come on!!!
EO	**Connection to mythologised identity**	**Mythic authorisation**	**Discursive authority**	Hi, we have managed to reduce carrier bags by over 2 billion and have not moved to banning or charging – this is ahead of all others.
Interlocutor	**Reference to value systems**	**Normative appeals**	**Discursive validation**	Yes, and charging is the way to go!!
EO	**Connection to mythologized identity**	**Mythic authorisation**	**Discursive authority**	Given the nature of our company, we do not believe that charging a fee for plastic bags is the right answer. We, instead, believe in educating our customers and offering alternatives…
Interlocutor	**Reference to value systems**	**Normative appeals**	**Discursive validation**	I love your carrier bags that are compostable. What a great idea! And they are great value at 5p each.
EO	**Drawing on (internal) resources / soliciting unity**	**Rational substantiation / Discursive co-optation**	**Discursive validation / Discursive finalisation**	Hello Julia. Thank you for your post. Our compostable carrier bag is the first product of its kind to be accredited by the UK Environment, Recycling Initiative (UKERI) and in 2010 it won an UKERI award, a great achievement… We are pleased that you like them. Brenda